



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

# GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Voluntary Report - public distribution

**Date:** 2/26/2009

**GAIN Report Number:** GM9008

## Germany

### Biotechnology

## Mixed Reactions to the Aigner Warning on Biotech Corn Cultivation Ban

**2009**

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**Report Highlights:**

For the first time, there is developing a two-sided public debate in the German media regarding agricultural biotechnology. Science and agricultural voices are highlighting what agricultural biotechnology offers Germany, and countering unsubstantiated concerns from some Government sources. The resulting split in the Germany Cabinet could affect voting positions in upcoming regulatory decisions.

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Includes PSD Changes: No  
Includes Trade Matrix: No  
Annual Report  
Berlin [GM1]  
[GM]

## **Mixed Reactions to the Aigner Warning on Biotech Corn Cultivation Ban**

There has been a mixed response to German Minister for Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection, Ilse Aigner's remarks regarding a possible new planting ban on biotech corn. For the first time, there appears to be a more two-sided debate about the issue. In the past, these types of remarks were universally supported. However, there are emerging voices in Germany supporting agricultural biotechnology. Aigner's proposal received wide coverage in German print and electronic media. In particular in Southern Germany, the issue of biotech crops on German fields has the potential to become an important topic for the upcoming elections to the European parliament.

Analyzing the press coverage on biotechnology it is interesting to note that supportive articles on biotechnology are predominantly found in papers with national distribution while local papers are predominantly critical about the technology. Local papers address the concerns of their readers on a more emotional basis instead of reporting about scientific facts. Local papers also seem to be more effective in influencing peoples' emotions.

## **Pro-Biotech Voices Emerge at the Federal and State Levels**

The spokesman for Minister Schavan, Federal Minister for Research, criticized Aigner's consideration for a biotech planting ban. He reportedly drew attention to the current Government's coalition agreement which says that the government will support research and use of biotech crops. The spokesman also said that research and use of safe agricultural biotechnology should not be demonized, otherwise Germany would be isolated. According to press reports, technical experts at the Federal Ministries of Health and Economics also expressed their concern about a cultivation ban.

In comments to the press, parliamentarians of the state of Brandenburg where most of the biotech corn is planted in Germany warned that Ministers Aigner's strategy could risk jobs in agriculture and research. Some sources have been quoted as saying that Minister Aigner's position is "greener than that of the Greens." The Brandenburg farmers' association is quoted in the local newspaper that "Germany would block itself out of the global markets with this strategy." The Agricultural Minister of the state of Sachsen-Anhalt states that "a ban would be legally problematic."

In a press release of February 18, the speaker of the group of innovative farmers 'InnoPlanta' strongly criticized Minister Aigner's move and warned that a ban would be risky for the international competitiveness of German farmers. On her homepage, the biotech speaker of the Free Democrats Party said that the intended cultivation ban would be illegal. She went on to add that this policy could result in the decision of young researchers to leave Germany because they do not see any future in this country.

## **Expected Groups Support Potential Ban**

Sigmar Gabriel, Federal Minister for Environment, joined Minister Aigner in the consideration of a cultivation ban. In a press release of his ministry on February 20, Gabriel pointed out that many countries in the EU for precautionary reasons have made use of the safeguard clause in the EU legislation and implemented cultivation bans, an example Germany should follow. Gabriel continued to say that Aigner will have the chance to prove that she will follow suit when she analyses the expected monitoring report for MON 810 planting from 2008. Also the deputy chairperson in the Bundestag Food Committee Dobrinski-Weiss (SPD) also calls for a cultivation ban to be implemented before the planting of corn in 2009. Comment: Gabriel's support for Aigner is not seen as a surprise since he is known to be an

opponent of biotech crop cultivation, which is also party-line of the Social Democrats Party (SPD).

The former Agricultural Minister Renate Kuenast, a member of the Green Party and still a member of the German Bundestag, is more skeptical whether it will be possible to order a cultivation ban before corn seeding begins. Kuenast is quoted in the press of having said "the chances for a ban are so marginal that it questions whether Aigner really wants to ban MON 810." Instead, Kuenast proposes to base a cultivation ban on scientific reports indicating risks of the technology. Comment: Kuenast did not provide details about what kind of reports she has in mind.

Several days prior to Minister Aigner's comments the Green Party introduced a motion to Bundestag to ban cultivation of genetically engineered corn in Germany. The motion was published on February 11 and will likely to be introduced at a Bundestag session no earlier than mid-March, with discussion to occur later.

Comment: The dispute on biotechnology in the Federal Government is being carefully observed and commented on by the media. Some journalists have commented that current Bavarian Minister President and former Agricultural Minister Horst Seehofer is playing a political game with Chancellor Merkel and her party by using agricultural biotechnology as a prominent election topic. Seehofer is desperately fighting to regain voters support in Bavaria. He identified that people in rural regions are very concerned about biotech crops. In the state election of last September, Seehofer's party lost votes to the Greens and the group of so-called Free Voters. Both political groups have expressed their opposition against biotech corn cultivation in Bavaria. Seehofer is now giving attention to the interest of the voters of these two groups to regain their support.

### **How will Germany Vote on Biotechnology in Brussels?**

Normally, the German Government interagency process coordinates a position prior to official votes in Brussels. The lead ministry on agricultural biotechnology is the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Consumer Protection in cooperation with the Ministry of the Environment. However, the Ministries of Research, Health and Economics also must be consulted to finalize this interagency position. It is possible that given the current disagreement between Ministries that Germany will be forced to abstain in the upcoming decisions about the lifting of national cultivation bans in EU member countries and the approval of further biotech corn events later in March.